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ABSTRACT

A study examined the responses of five university students from linguistically diverse backgrounds to an unfamiliar essay examination task to be performed in English. Subjects were an East Indian educated entirely in English, a Korean-English bilingual, a Norwegian fluent in English, a black middle-class American, and an urban American. Data were drawn from interviews and think-aloud protocols collected from the undergraduates taking real essay exams. Results are presented in case-study style, with discussion addressing the differential learning and writing strategies used by each student. The findings cast doubt on some common assumptions about the essay exam strategies of culturally and linguistically diverse students, and suggest that while the essay test has value for some forms of assessment, the student's test preparation practice, understanding, and feelings of membership may contribute to making essay tests as inequitable a form of assessment as any other test type. Sample essay questions are appended. (MSE)

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Essay test strategies and cultural diversity: Pragmatic failure, pragmatic accommodation and the definition of excellence

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All around the United States, universities are committed to finding ways of attracting and retaining a diverse student body. Many initiatives are necessary to achieve this. We must find ways for linguistically and culturally diverse students to succeed in the key literacy events of the academy - events such as the completion of assigned reading, visits to professors' office hours, writing term papers, and taking essay exams.

Essay exams are one of our most common rites of passage into, through and out of the academy, yet we know surprisingly little about the ways student writers read and interpret essay exam situations and prompts. There is clearly a need to look closely at essay test-taking strategies of students from all kinds of backgrounds. This need is more urgent, however, for students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds, who often do not share the "testwise-ness" of students from the mainstream. This paper reports a study of five students - two Standard English as a Second Dialect, two bilingual and one English as a Second Language - as they confront and respond to an unfamiliar essay exam task. The data consist of interviews and think-aloud protocols collected from undergraduates taking real essay exams. The results question some of our assumptions about the essay exam strategies of culturally and linguistically diverse students, and suggest some important implications for both test development and instruction with the needs of a culturally diverse student population in mind.

Introduction

Arvind came from India as a junior. He had, he says, plenty of experience of taking tests in writing.

> "The way I did the test was the same way I would have written it in India... There they like to have a little bit of history, you know... and then try and get something in the present... They like much more points than just a few points... building up... they like a much wider area to be covered... and that's what I tried... but subsequently I was told that I should have stopped on just a few points and tried to make them

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look nice (a writing teacher) said I had too many ideas, and the structure wasn't too good.. Organization wasn't right exactly...
I think that what you're looking for here is very different from what they are looking for there... I think now I have a slight idea of what you people want and I daresay I might be able to write it according to the way it should be here."

As Arvind read the brief background paragraph (shown in Appendix A) he responded that "it's a little too specific" and "I don't know too much about that." He spoke mostly about the gulf he felt between his experience at Delhi University and what he has seen so far at the University of Michigan. His attention eventually directed to the paragraph which states the essay readers' expectations, his response was: "I really don't pay too much attention to that... just try to do your best." In India once a paper is given to a professor, he says, whatever the course or the context, "you never ever see it in your life again... you can't do a thing about it."

The paragraph Arvind ignored was painstakingly developed over a long period of time, to key writers in as strongly as possible to the basis of the judgments that would be made. It was an attempt, as genuine as we knew how to make it, to open our minds to the writers so that they would know us, and in knowing us, use that knowledge to their own advantage. But Arvind declares his intention to let that chance pass him by, preferring to "just do your best."

Argument

Essay exams are one of our most common rites of passage into, through and out of the academy, yet we know surprisingly little about the ways student

writers read and interpret essay exam situations and prompts. There was a time when it was assumed that tests, all tests, were fair in and of themselves, and that when a person had difficulties with a test the responsibility was the individual's. More recently, the situation has been somewhat reversed, and it has become common for groups and individuals to blame "unfair testing" for every kind of test failure. Perhaps it is time to think not of blame but of explanations, not of error or deviance but of difference. Through this paper my intention is to argue that to find ways for linguistically and culturally diverse students to succeed in the key literacy events of the academy - events such as the completion of assigned reading, visits to professors' office hours, writing term papers, and taking essay exams -- we must stop making generalizations and claims about what so-called "minority" students can and cannot do, or what they do or don't do. We must begin to collect data to discover whether the claims and generalizations are anything more than stereotypes getting in the way of clear sight of the size and shape of the problem. We must first discover whether there really is a problem, and if there is, where it is. Only then can we approach considerations of right action.

Assumptions About "Bias" in Testing

In "Testing Black Student Writers," Roscoe Brown Jr. says:

> (we must) persist in our evaluations of the test instruments, insist on the coupling of tests with other criteria whenever appropriate, and accelerate the recent trends toward the creative use of testing as a facilitator and not a roadblock. Moreover, we should strive to improve the quality of education experienced by blacks and other minorities so that they will have a better chance to perform well on tests. (p.98)

Brown is concerned over specific issues such as bias in test content, predictive accuracy of test scores for minority students, and uses of test results; he is also concerned for general social equity. He points out that variables inherent in the testing context itself -- speededness, the test taker's past experience of tests and their outcomes, the test-taker's level of anxiety -- can affect students from minority groups more than others. This effect becomes test bias when the test does not measure the same dimension(s) of achievement across different groups. The AERA/APA/NCME **Code of Fair Testing Practices** tells us that test developers should "indicate the nature of the evidence obtained concerning the appropriateness of each test for groups of different racial, ethnic, or linguistic background tested."[1] Yet many writing assessment programs find it difficult to obtain and use background data on race and ethnicity, and thus to investigate questions of test bias. In fact, few studies have looked at writing tests by ethnic origin. One of these few is White & Thomas (1981), which looked at the scores of over 10,000 California State University students on the TSWE (part of the College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Test) and the EPT (English Placement Test [Educational Testing Service for California State University]), which includes an essay test. White & Thomas found, they argue, clear evidence that the TSWE is biased against Black students, Mexican-American students, and Asian-American students by comparison with the scores of the same students on the essay component of the EPT, and they argue for expanded essay testing of minority students and reduction of multiple choice testing. Chaplin (1988) reminds us that in all the NAEP writing assessments, Black students have scored below White students. She conducted a study to discover whether there are features in Black students' writing that interfere with successful communication, whether Black student writers use the same kinds of writing strategies as other writers

of the same age group, and whether there are identifiable features of Black students' writing that reflect a learning style or cognitive approach associated with ethnicity. Chaplin did not look at scores, but at features of writing. In her analyses of 172 essays from the NJHSPT and 603 NAEP essays, Chaplin found that while essay readers were able to identify writing by Black students some of the time, more often they made incorrect identifications, for example, Black students' writing was incorrectly identified as by White students, White students' writing was said to be by Black students, or writing by members of other minorities was identified as by Black students. She found that fewer than 5% of the students used Black Vernacular English consistently in any mode: although there were many occurrences of features found in BVE they were mixed with standard usage to express the same meanings or structures in the same essay, suggesting that the students knew the standard forms too. Chaplin was not concerned in this study with scores or placements.

One of the issues that surfaces again and again in writing assessment is whether or not students should have a choice of topic [known as a "prompt"]. The CUNY writing assessment, for example, offers a choice of prompt precisely in order to accommodate the diverse backgrounds of the student body (Bruffee, 1983). One of the questions to which I sought an answer was whether our prompts, which unarguably were created by white middle-class college teachers, were an impediment to the students, or whether the careful scaffolding we were providing was fulfilling its objective. Doubting the value of a quantitative approach to issues of test bias, I chose instead to carry out a small-scale qualitative study. I interviewed students who came to me[1] to appeal their placement in that program -- usually to appeal placement in the lowest level, Practicum. I have selected five of these recorded interviews to

consider here, in which I believe we can find a number of important strands that need to be pulled from the weave of the cloth so that we can see them more clearly.

Learning to Respond

Listening to Arvind talk about the prompt (shown in Appendix A), seeing his lack of deep analysis of the meaning of the prompt, I am tempted to think that he lacks the language skill to pick up on the messages the prompt is intended to carry. But Arvind was educated wholly in English, and listening to him speak it is clear that, orally at least, he is a native speaker, although of a different dialect of English. The evidence suggests, then, that Arvind does not lack language skill. A next thought will relate to the point I raised earlier, that this is a decontextualized, proficiency not achievement, task. It may be that Arvind is poorly prepared, because of his past experience, to write on this prompt, which after all was developed with a population in mind which is vastly English native speaker. But let us hear Arvind further:

> I would say that a wide education would be a good thing to do ... one of the reasons why I have come here is because here it is not just book learning as it is in India. In India you just go to college and if you have a few courses.. if you do economics you just do economics and nothing else... but out here you get a much wider variety.. I especially agree with what's written with this thing because I was in a school till my tenth grade where everything was just book knowledge, you know, you went home and studied everything by heart... and then I was shifted to a boarding school, and there you had to take part in all sorts of activities... and I did feel that it helped me out in life (pause)...

> I'll write basically of my experience there... I can't really write very much on the topic I was given, but basically... I'll just write about my experiences...

From what Arvind says here, as the result of direct prompting, it becomes clear that he does have specific ideas and responses to bring to bear on this topic; more - he has direct comparative experience, evidence of a kind studies show are much valued by our essay readers, and which few of our entering students can bring to this prompt. In content, we may say, Arvind is actually at an advantage. More likely, I think, is that Arvind lacks pragmatic skill: educated in English, nevertheless Arvind does not have the native English college student's view of the prompt as an important artifact. He sees it vaguely and imprecisely, he assigns little value to its elements apart from the location of the topic in the broad area of comparing 2 views of education. Arvind has clearly not had an education which included what teachers of English as a Second Language at college level have come to know and love - or abhor - as "**study skills.**" A course which shows him how to look at the prompt, how to deconstruct it and get at the heart of what readers are looking for, to "psych out the test" as our American students often refer it, may be what Arvind needs.

In fact Arvind did not write about his personal experience at all. Rather, he wrote a long and abstract theoretical discussion which does not engage the powerful realities that he is ideally equipped, inhabiting as he has two cultures in his home country and, now, two countries, to deal with. Readers' descriptions of this essay, elicited for the purpose of fleshing out my picture of Arvind's pragmatic success or failure, fell into the general category of "Bull."

We might say, then, that we have here a case of pragmatic failure. Arvind has yet to learn what will work in this new context.

But let us turn now to look at the case of Kon. Kon is a Korean immigrant to the US who considers his English and Korean to be of equal standard. Kon's spoken English is fluent although noticeably idiomatic and redolent with systematic errors.

Kon feels that he got off to the wrong start, that his essay was "off the topic" but he didn't feel that he could do anything about it, even though he finished well before the time was up.

When Kon looked at the prompt (Appendix B) he began by talking about his strategies. He says:

> if I were going to write about this topic - which I am going to (laughs) I will think about it for quite a while before deciding on which side I should take... I'll write the pro and con and list them and the one with... the most issues will be the one I'll write about.

Kon says he uses mind-mapping as his pre-writing strategy normally, but anxiety got the better of him and on this occasion he did not. He describes his mind-maps as an "outline," and his references to pro and con sides suggest a training which emphasized the duality of issues facing societies today. We may say that Kon has learned to think in good guy/bad guy terms. Asked whether he will say anything at all about the other side of the issue on this prompt, the side he will not have chosen, Kon says:

> I might, but I doubt it, because... that would make me look a little bit indecisive and... I might... er... just a couple of lines... but not much.

Asked to think about how he might arrange his answer. Kon says:

> I would first talk about how the animals came into the use of this experiment... I would say things like.. "human beings have learned to use animals blah-blah-blah" and then... in my... at the end of my introductory paragraph... I would take my position and say like... whether it is good or bad. And from then on I would just like... write the topic sentence... um... from the strongest to worst... um and then just write the body and then the conclusion

Although the prompt cues him to look at the issue from more than one point of view (long term and short term, for a start), when I ask him if he plans to deal with more than one perspective on the topic Kon responds that, no, he will choose a side and stick to it. His greater concern is to "come up with an original idea, an idea that the reader would never think about" in order to show his perceptiveness. But he also says that sometimes his search for that "original idea" causes him to waste time in fruitless searching.

Yet the essay Kon actually wrote revealed none of the tight structure we would expect from a competent writer who was able to put the theoretical strategies into practice. It was desperately short, vague and unfocussed. It read as though he has nothing to say. A look at the transcript of his session shows that almost all the time Kon talked about <u>how</u> he would do things, not what the content of them would be, nor how they would build up a whole picture from their pieces. Kon's structure, it seems, was an empty shell. Kon's essay is unimpressive: my essay readers gave it almost the lowest possible score on a scale where the extreme ends are rarely used indeed. Yet he believes that he has strategies for approaching the task, and for putting together a satisfactory response. He describes himself as a pretty good writer. Certainly he has a fairly complete language for talking about what he will do in his writing:

introductory paragraph, topic sentence, and so on; he also has some organizational schemata to work with, as his discussion of "topic sentence(s) from strongest to worst" indicates. Kon believes he has learned a specific way of coping with writing tasks, it has evidently been adequately successful in the past, and he plans to keep using it, even though it has already let him down in the more rarified atmosphere of college. Perhaps we have here a case of pragmatic accommodation.

Kris came from Norway specifically to get a degree in the U.S., and was first exempted from an ESL writing course by his performance on an ESL writing test. He thus came late for the main writing assessment and was seen by me. Faced with a prompt about teenage employment, Kris's first thoughts were that he'll

> be defending a point... you know... I think you shouldn't work while you're in school.. I didn't work myself... well I did sometimes, but I always found that those periods were the periods where I found that I had the worst results... it just took all my energy, drained me out... but maybe other things... when you do a job, unless it's extremely interesting, it just draws all the energy from you, wears you out

Kris' initial response, then, is to take a particular point of view and to bring in his own experience immediately. Having said this, however, Kris goes back to the prompt again, and, unprompted, re-reads it. He speaks in broken phrases "yes, you could do that" "well, but what about summer jobs?" and then in longer segments, showing his awareness of my presence:

> most people live at home anyway, and you don't get all that much feel for what money's worth, not having to pay the rent, or the utilities bills or... whatever... it takes a long time before you experience all that... with

the bills and everything... so... if you think you can be without it, I'd say 'don't do it in high school

After this long oral response to something in the prompt that acted as a trigger, Kris falls silent, re-reading the prompt to himself. He starts in:

oh well, that's (he does not explain what "that" is) one thing... yeh, I'd tend to go in that direction, but... yeh, you know... I see, I see, some of the points they have too... of course it is valuable to be responsible for your own money and... er... and also I think it's bit different in the States 'cos... you tend to want to... also save money for college... in Norway you don't have to do that, 'cos you get everything financed

Kris spoke for over ten minutes, drawing on the prompt again and again, each time seeing a new point he could make, or his "opponent" could make. At last he began to think about how to actually get started. "I think I should make a little outline" he says, and begins to do so, commenting that "I'll try to write the general stuff, and as I go along I'll hope to find the details. If I have to find all my points before I start, I'm not going to be done. His outline in fact follows his scheme, having 3 or 4 main points on each side, but no specifics. Asked if there is anything he'll be keeping in mind while he's writing, Kris says:

Ah, yeh, that I'm consistent. If I'm not careful I might start off meaning one thing and end up meaning something else... if I do find more arguments later for the other point of view, at least I will round it up saying something really contradictory to what I started out saying (laughs) don't want that

Kris makes a comment on the paragraph describing the readers and their expectations: he says this is helpful and a problem. It's very surprising, he says, to find such a paragraph, but he sees it as threatening. When you read it

carefully, he says, it's really just a paragraph about how to write essays, nothing different from what you're used to, but it seems as though there is something special "they" want. He picks up on the request to develop ideas with evidence or examples, saying that in "the normal essay" he might have just put down his ideas as general statements but not supported them very much ("paragraph--statement; new paragraph--statement"). Now that he's seen this he'll pay attention to having some evidence, to thinking about what sort of statements he can support.

Kris began to think, really **think** about the prompt from the beginning, and spent a good deal of time doing so. He thought about it from several points of view, seeming to be holding a dialog or an argument with himself as he read and re-read and found new points. The kind of engagement Kris has with the prompt is more intellectual, more centered on ideas and values and evidence, than the engagement of Arvind and Kon. In talking of structure, Kris' concern is with meaning (I don't want to start off meaning one thing and end meaning another"). Kris reads and comments on the paragraph which contains the reference to the readers, and the criteria, the only one of eight nonnative writers to do so. Having noticed this, he speaks of how he will adjust his strategy to take account of what he has been told. First, he takes what he has be told as the truth; second, he accepts, as far as we can see, the reasonableness of the information and expectation. Kris seems to have strategies to take new expectations into account. This kind of response is only possible, I would suggest, when a writer is already familiar with the general conventions which underlie the new expectations he or she faces. Kris is not accustomed to this overt statement of the reader of the text, but he is clearly familiar with the concept that writing is for a reader, and that the reader is an

intelligent, responsive shaper and sharer of ideas. In this he is far removed from Arvind, who sees "them," the judges, as a barrier he must cross. Kris spends his energies on engaging the ideas, not on trying to second-guess the ideas the readers might want him to have, or the structure the readers might want him to use. Kris's response fits with the definition of excellence that is implicit in our view of the writing process and of the goals of writing.

Amy is a Black student from a middle-class suburb of Detroit, who was initially placed into Practicum, the lowest level of the program, took the Practicum half-semester course, and was placed Repeat Practicum. She came to me to appeal that decision. Amy's portfolio, which is the basis of her exit placement, contained an in-class impromptu modelled on the prompts in the writing assessment. In preparation for a repeat writing assessment, I asked her to tell me about how she had approached the prompt in her portfolio, and why. Amy said:

> I thought this was a good topic, but I don't know too much about it. I guess I never knew anybody who this happened to, or anyway she didn't tell me. If some guy did it to me and I didn't want him to, and we were on a date, I don't know what I'd do. I might not say anything either. It's like, all the guys know the rules, but I guess sometimes stuff just happens.. where I come from, I never heard about this. I dated a few guys in school but nothing much till I met... this boy. I still see him when I go home...

Amy's first response, then, is to relate the prompt to her personal experience. As she talks, her focus wanders away from the prompt, from the writing task at hand. A comparison is difficult because she had written on this prompt before we had our interview, unlike the other students here, but our

conversation suggests that she found this an interesting topic and was not distracted by the emotional content of it (this topic would not be an acceptable assessment prompt for that reason). However, Amy says she doesn't know much about the topic -- she says this descriptively, not assigning blame -- and the interview moves from the topic to her own dating experiences, which happily did not include date rape. At a later stage in the interview, I ask Amy whether there are two sides on this issue, or is it, at least from the woman's perspective, a one-sided issue. She responds:

> Well, like, you can't have date rape if there's no date... some guys feel like if you go out with them you're interested in sex right off... I never go on dates by myself.. my girlfriend from home and I go out together, she went on one once and the whole time she was tense, she was real glad to get back in one piece, she couldn't have a good time.

It isn't clear whether Amy is answering my question or not: she appears to begin, but she allows herself to be sidetracked into her own experience, and I, at least, lose track of how her answer relates to my question and to the prompt she was given. I also find it difficult to relate what she says to the essay she has written. While Amy focuses on personal experience as she talks to me about this topic, that personal experience did not transfer into the essay, which reads as curiously distant and, at the same time, disjointed. I comment to her that she seems to have set this up like a term paper, and she replies:

> yeh, well... we did stuff in class about research papers... we learned how you've got to have done some reading, get some evidence... stuff like that. I enjoyed looking things up in the coursepack, and I did this paper for my portfolio, it's on teenage pregnancy, I read a lot of stuff about that... (the instructor) told me I didn't have much... there wasn't

> enough ideas, arguments in my first essay, that you people like to get some facts... so I tried to, like, bring in evidence

Perhaps Amy has learned this lesson better than she should: perhaps she strains for the tone of a researched paper in her impromptu writing, and does not look at her own experience analytically in order to extract from the personal the material she can apply to the task at hand. When I turn the page, I find that the essay stops (rather than ends) halfway down. When I ask her about this, speak of my surprise to turn the page and find this unconvincing and early fade-out, she accepts the comment:

> yeh, like... I wanted to do a bunch of stuff about him (the Ann Arbor date rape case) but they hadn't decided yet and I didn't know too much of the details... so I couldn't say what they should've done until I found out. I thought I might write about the woman side, but I didn't read too much of what she said... they didn't let her talk to the Daily (campus newspaper)

Amy has written herself into a corner: she has embarked on an argument about which she knows too little and for which she has little support. She could have left the point and begun a new one, or used several other arguments with limited support for each, but she has set up an expectation for herself that she will handle this impromptu like the longer paper she did in class, and she lacks the flexibility to change that strategy when it proves not to work. She is aware of the problem, but doesn't see that there were solutions located elsewhere entirely. Like Kon, Amy feels she has learned a specific way of handling her writing tasks, and like him she over-generalizes it. Introducing Amy to a new genre, have we failed to help her understand the uses and limits of the new genre? This too, seems to be an instance of pragmatic accommodation.

Joe is an athlete from urban Detroit, who by his own account "loves to write." When Joe sat and talked with me about how he would go about writing the impromptu essay, in his case a practice essay written early in the course, he began:

> Well... I never had much to do with computers. They must be a good thing... I wish I knew about them... it's why I like this class, I never had a chance to learn to use them... I sent a(n e-mail) message, I hope he got it. If you don't know computers you can't get much of a job. But it's not that hard to learn once you get the chance

Joe continues in this way for several minutes, moving between expressing general approval of 'the computer revolution' and expressing anxiety about his own ability to move into that world. I ask him about access to computers at his high school, and he isn't sure if there were any or not, but he never got near one. When I press him for specifics on how computers and the need for computer knowledge have affected his own life he talks about the 24-hour money machine. I realize that Joe has little notion of the kinds of functions that computers perform in our daily lives and in our society. I ask him about the reference in the prompt to the dangers of decreased human contact and devaluing of individual differences. He responds:

> Yeh, but... you know... it's different... your friends, your family, that's nothing to do with computers...

there is a lengthy pause. Joe cannot form a connection here. I move on, asking him how he thinks he might start the essay. He says:

> Well, I'll try to describe the benefits and problems, like it says... I'll give my opinion... and... I'll give some other ones...

There is another lengthy pause. We talk a little about this and that. I understand that this a prompt Joe has little to say about, that doesn't touch his world much at all.

The essay Joe wrote after our conversation does show some following through on his plan to talk about benefits and problems, but mostly it shows his inexperience in this area, the lack of material, of ideas to bring to the topic. Even at this early stage of his course, Joe understood fairly well what was expected of him. He knew he was expected to provide "evidence," to look at more than one side of a question, to weigh and conclude. But once he has written about the 24-hour money machine, its convenience and the problems when the cards get damaged, he's out of text because he's out of ideas because he's out of experience. This, then, is another kind of pragmatic failure: Arvind had experience he did not use; Joe has no experience to use. Add to this an uncertain command of the logical structure of discourse and of sentence grammar, and readers see little to commend Joe's essay.

Implications

If I had been asked to state a hypothesis before I began this small study, I would probably have said that I expected to find that students from other cultures and from minority groups within the US would be disadvantaged on the writing assessment because of their lack of certain essential cultural and strategic/pragmatic knowledge. The cultural knowledge that would be lacking, I would have predicted, would relate to culturally-differentiated viewpoints on political/moral questions such as the use or non-use of alcohol, appropriate roles for women and men within the home, and the kinds of learning to be valued. The strategic/pragmatic knowledge that would be

lacking, I would have predicted, would primarily concern appropriate text structures for creating and furthering an argument. Further, I would probably have predicted that nonnative writers of English would be more at a disadvantage than bilingual writers, who would in turn be more disadvantaged than Black writers. But of my five students, only Kris attains a standard definition of excellence in either writing product or writing process. And Kris is a product of western civilization, of a european culture which shares many values with the US and other countries of the first world. Writing in a second language, Kris is at home in the culture and the pragmatics: there are some unfamiliar expectations, but Kris has the confidence and the flexibility to attend to and adjust to those unfamiliarities while trusting in the skills he has already developed.

And it is here, I think, that for me the main learning comes from the study. What distinguishes Kris's strategies from the other four writers is the building of evidence from story. As Kris thinks about the prompt, he thinks from his personal experience, to wider issues, back to personal experience again. He mines his personal experience and recreates his feelings and his reactions to his experiences over and over, looking at his own responses from different viewpoints. He argues with himself, and in that process he sets up a model he can then use for structuring an argument textually. His essay incorporates his "story," interpreting it in a wider context for the reader. Contrast Arvind, who in his think-aloud has personal experience at the center of his thinking, contrasting and linking two kinds of experience in his own culture and experience across two cultures, building a range and depth of personal evidence that is both richer and more significant than Kris's. But Arvind's essay allows none of this to show: not only doesn't he try to bring in personal

evidence, he has edited it out before it ever reached the page. Arvind seems unaware, or unable to believe, that his readers would value the kinds of experience he has to offer, and so he suppresses it. Contrast again Joe, who in his thinking-aloud can talk only of lack of knowledge, lack of opportunity, lack of experience, but who cannot turn this into a argument, cannot see this experience of life outside the computer revolution as evidence powerfully relevant to the prompt. Joe looks into his life and finds no relevant experience; he does not have Kris's strategies for engaging in dialog with himself, for discovering the relevant experience within his experience, for making connections between who he is and what he can say in response to the prompt. He does not respond to my hints that the absence of computers from his schooling and from his life is material in itself, that he might make an argument about equity and alienation from the story of his exclusion from the so-called 'computer revolution.' Arvind and Joe both have an important story to tell: neither of them, probably for different reasons, tells it.

Now contrast Kon and Amy with both Kris, and Arvind and Joe. Both Kon and Amy have worked to learn some strategies which will allow them to adapt to the demands of one, limited, kind of pseudo-academic discourse and have learned to see their writing as embedded in a culture which is simplistically represented by that genre. Neither of them is at home in this new culture: Amy experiences conflict between the ideas she has and that she would like to talk about, and the constraints of a genre she has learned, which was never intended for this context. In her struggle, the genre won. Kon is so focussed on using strategies he has learned that he seems unable to think about ideas, about raw material to be strategically shaped. Kon seemed never to think in terms of what he felt, what he knew, what he had experienced, but

went straight to, and stayed at, the level of strategy. His essay cannot show strategic skill because he has no evidence, personal or otherwise, to bring, and strategies after all only work on material, not in place of it. For Kon, there is no winner.

If Kon and Amy are the initiated, and Arvind and Joe are the uninitiated, I wonder who is better off? If the goal is to achieve the flexibility and reader-consciousness that Kris has, I wonder who is closer?

Conclusion

What I don't know, what I need to know, is whether it is merely coincidence that Kris, the european male, possesses skills and strategies that my readers, and most well-read composition instructors these days, value and reward. I need to know whether teachers' attempts to initiate Amy and Kon into the demands of the academy have taken something from them, made them appear worse, or whether they are poor writers made marginally better by the addition of some rudimentary strategies. And I need to know whether Arvind and Joe would be better helped by some work with text structure and genre, or by the liberation of the story that is in them. I began my study because I wanted to learn whether my test was "fair" to non-members of the mainstream US culture. I took no specific political or philosophical position. I began not out of conviction but out of concern. My concern is heightened by the interpretations I place on my limited data. Essay tests do often offer a more meaningful assessment than so-called 'objective' tests, but only if they are used wisely, with understanding of what they do and do not do. If some students approach the essay test, or any kind of test, with specific test preparation practice and others do not, if some understand and share the

philosophical assumptions that underlie the test and some do not, if some view the test readers as members of the same community as themselves and some do not --- if the definition of excellence is opaque to some and obscure to others --- how can we say we have a fair test? In this tiny and unrepresentative study it seems that inequity, where it exists, is replicated on an essay test as on any other form of test.

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1 in my role at that time as Associate Director of the University of Michigan English Composition Board, the university writing program

APPENDIX A

[education]

*Read the following paragraph, then write an essay as you are asked in the paragraph which is in **boldface:***

James Duderstadt, the President of the University of Michigan, believes that "We must not view undergraduate education at Michigan as simply aimed at extracting knowledge from the vast information characterizing our society. Instead ... our students must learn how to extract wisdom from knowledge and through that wisdom learn the art of life itself." While many people share his point of view, trends such as the dramatic increase in undergraduates choosing business majors emphasize the view of college education as the development of skills which can be used for work or career. In the modern world, finding a balance between conflicting goals and needs is difficult.

Write an essay explaining your view of the purpose of a college education. Make your reasons for holding that view clear, but also consider the arguments of other people who hold different views.

Remember that your essay will be read by college writing instructors. These readers expect to find that you have thought seriously about the complexities of the subject. They look for development of ideas and supporting evidence or examples. They also expect you to have organized and presented your essay clearly.

APPENDIX B

[environment]

Read the following paragraph, then write an essay as you are asked in the paragraph which is in ***boldface:***

While many people now consider cleaning up specific sites and cases of pollution to be an urgent short-term priority, few people have made the battle to preserve the environment a long-term priority. Humanity, it seems, responds best to disaster. Although in the U.S. there have attempts at ensuring environmental preservation through legislation and law enforcement, many environmentalists argue that a clean and safe environment will only be assured when every individual accepts responsibility for living an ecologically-sound lifestyle. The battle for the future is far from won.

Write an essay in which you address the issues involved in taking responsibility for protecting the environment in which we live, and in balancing environmental needs with the demands of an industrialized world. Establish and explain your own point of view, and take into consideration that other people may have different views of the extent and urgency of the problem.

Remember that your essay will be read by college writing instructors. These readers expect to find that you have thought seriously about the complexities of the subject. They look for development of ideas and supporting evidence or examples. They also expect you to have organized and presented your essay clearly.

END

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